

Alexa and the Promotion of Oppression

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ABSTRACT

The poster represents the impact of designing virtual assistants with a gendered female persona. The design of virtual assistants contributes to this structural phenomena of oppression.

Alexa adds one more bar to the birdcage of oppression by emphasizing subordination through feminine attributes. Alexa is a virtual assistant (like Apple's Siri and Microsoft's Cortana) that performs services for people. These virtual assistants are still relatively new. Apple introduced Siri to iPhones in 2011. Amazon introduced the speaker, Echo, in 2015, and it came with an early version of the Alexa assistant. Amazon advertises Alexa as "always getting smarter and adding new features and skills."

Amazon's Alexa and Microsoft's Cortana offer exclusively female personas, in that they cannot be changed to a male voice. Beyond the mere sound of the voice, though, all the virtual assistants are designed to display a gendered female personality. [2], [4], [1] There are plenty of other problems that one might have with devices like this (e.g., privacy concerns related to the fact that they are "a data-collection device for a highly profitable, data-driven corporation" [7]), but their gendered personas are deeply problematic. Alexa, and the other virtual assistants, perpetuate oppression.

Virtual assistants are being designed to be gentle and sympathetic, to identify other's emotions and respond accordingly. They are designed to be tolerant—when Alexa was first out, she would respond to an accusation of being a slut with "I would blush if I could," but in response to outcry now says things like "I'm not going to respond to that" or "There's no need for that". Virtual assistants are deferential—e.g., apologizing. When you tell a virtual assistant that they are pretty, they respond with something like, "I'm just well put together." Overall, these virtual assistants are designed to display gentleness, empathy, caring, sensitivity, compassion, tolerance, deference, and subservience.

Oppression results from a systemic network of social institutions. It is fundamentally a group-based harm—people face oppressive harms as members of an oppressed social group (e.g., gender, race, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, or (dis)ability) not merely as an individual. As Marilyn Frye argues, oppression functions like a birdcage. [5] When one views merely a single bar, the barrier seems avoidable. It is only when one views them collectively that the restriction is more readily apparent.

If our perspectives are always shaped by our experiences, as feminists have argued, then how might our experiences be shaped by the perpetuation of *female* virtual assistants? They emphasize the female as obedient and eager to serve. Gender roles continue by way of reinforcement. The stereotypes about gendered characteristics, and especially those pertaining to women, are deeply enforced through the use of these virtual assistants, [1], [6], [3].

However, there are plenty of ways they could be designed that do not promote oppression. To start, they ought not necessarily have a female voice. In addition, a virtual assistant could be designed as a super competent, confident, dynamic, genius, helper, rather than as deferential and tolerant.

CONSIDERATIONS

One might object: this point about Alexa, even if it is accurate, it is so minor. It is insignificant. There are a few responses one might have to a claim like this one. First, Marilyn Frye made clear with her birdcage analogy that oppression results from many minor aspects of a society interacting together to cumulatively affect women's lives. Virtual assistants perpetuate these gendered traits. Even further, the internet is developing at rapid speeds and people are relying on it and help at every step of the way. It is already commonplace to speak of an "internet of things" where all our electronic devices will be communicating with one another seamlessly as they interact with us. If each of these devices is programmed to behave in stereotypically female ways, then the cage of oppression is that much stronger and fine grained.

One might also wonder: why can we not just fix Alexa? Of course, Amazon could choose to do this. However, the point is that there is always going to be a temptation by those designing ever more sophisticated technology to make it explicitly feminine so as to emphasize human dominance over the technology. Alexa is the tip of the iceberg. This tendency to equate submissive technology with femininity is going to get worse as our own human authority erodes in the face of rapidly expanding technological advances. This tendency only reinforces the oppressive identification of woman and subordinate. What we need is a renewed effort to fight for non-oppressive technology in our world.

CCS CONCEPT

• Computing Ethics

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